

July 12, 1959

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Dear Burr: (Further to my letter of the 17th June-- I hope you've received all of the accessory reports)

I have just received a letter from Bronk asking me to sit on the Space Science Board. The only point this could have would be to ensure the standing of a committee of the Board to concern itself with the fundamental problems of extra-terrestrial life. This is quite distinct from the Bioastronautics Committee which is advisory to the armed services.

I hope you will keep me in touch with your plans for an additional committee. I have to say that it think it would be disastrous to set one up at this time if it distracted from what we have been trying to do a propos the Space Science Board. As I wrote you before, we are preparing a general 'position paper' for adoption by the Board -- what confusion if there are two such papers! Of course any position that is adopted should be liable to criticism-- as much as possible before it is published, but no harm in subsequent scientific ~~XX~~ polemics. I would urge on you the desirability of giving the present arrangements a trial, for some interval, to see how well they work out and to save the possible constitution of a new more general committee as an ace-in-the-hole if they prove to be inadequate in their conclusions, representation or effectiveness. If you do proceed with this now or later I would hope you could arrange enough interlocking to ensure that we don't unintentionally publish divergent conclusions.

If I can get a go-ahead from Berkner, I would like to suggest the following scheme (and hope to get some reaction from you meanwhile). That we set up a rather small committee on a regional basis-- say Luria, Atwood or yourself, Horowitz or Calvin and myself. Each of us would try to conduct a series of informal conferences along the lines of Westex in our own areas and circulate the reports. The four section chairmen might need get together once a year or so, perhaps at one of the regional conferences. This sounds a bit cumbersome, but the questions are not trivial in scope or implications. I don't see how we can have very many recurrent national meetings and keep them either useful or talented. Perhaps in due course (sooner if it can be international) we should have a symposium, but this should be preceded by some more rumination.

The regional meetings do work out very well when people can get to them in an hour's drive or plane trip.

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Have you developed any views on the likelihood of possible back-contamination of the earth? This is small, but how small is it? And what would you ~~xxxxxxx~~ consider to be an acceptable level of risk: 10^{-6} ? 10^{-9} ? (Our presentday political risks are certainly very much larger than these figures, but we have less control over them!)

Yours